

SUBJECT: A report and recommendation on a revision to The Banks Planned Development Concept Plan and Development Program Statement.

BACKGROUND:

On February 16, 2006, the Planning Commission approved a zone change on The Banks property from a DD-D zoning district to a PD – Planning Development district. The Hamilton County/Cincinnati Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan was to serve as the Concept Plan and Development Program Statement for The Banks Planned Development District. This plan would provide the conceptual baseline on which future development plans for The Banks would be reviewed and approved. There are two blocks within the Hamilton County/Cincinnati Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan that conflict with the approved plan for the Central Riverfront Park. The Hamilton County/Cincinnati Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan for these two blocks (blocks 10 and 12) should be changed so that they are consistent with the current plans for the park.

The original Central Riverfront Park Plan was approved by the Park Board in 1999 and is the plan which Congress has authorized the US Army Corps of Engineers to follow for design of the park. It is also the basis for the City's current Federal request to authorize park construction and to appropriate the first \$8 million of Federal funds for the construction of the park. The Park Board, Recreation Commission, Urban Design Review Board and the City Planning Commission previously approved this 1999 plan.

The Hamilton County/Cincinnati Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan was approved in 2002 and incorporated the 1999 Central Riverfront Park Plan. In the last six years, the park plan has evolved. In the Park Board's work with the Corps of Engineers, 3CDC, the Port Authority, the City administration, the County, and various stakeholders, it became clear that construction of restaurants and retail in block 12 as per the Hamilton County/Cincinnati Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan were not appropriate. Any buildings at this location would have to be built on structures raised at least 12' above Mehring Way to avoid seasonal flooding. This would make servicing and access difficult and would likely be a visual intrusion for the park. Furthermore, this property was donated to the Park Board as parkland and cannot have private commercial uses built on it. The Hamilton County/Cincinnati Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan also proposes a "boardwalk" that would cross Mehring Way on a diagonal at least 15' above grade and connect to more commercial uses on Block 10. The Park Board, City and 3CDC agreed several years ago that the original boardwalk concept was inappropriate and was not likely to succeed economically. The boardwalk crossing Mehring Way would be a visual intrusion and the retail too far removed from the rest of The Banks to successfully draw pedestrian traffic.

On March 16, 2006 the Park Board approved an updated Central Riverfront Park Plan, which incorporated all of the design changes since the plan was first approved in 1999. The intent was to also modify the Hamilton County/Cincinnati Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan to be consistent with the approved Central Riverfront Park Plan. The Park Board would like to have these changes made to the Hamilton County/Cincinnati Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan prior to any actions that would alter the zoning of The Banks property.

Description of Approved Changes:

The 2006 Central Riverfront Park Plan is consistent with the original park program and generally consistent with the approved 1999 park plan. Changes to the plan have been the result of design

refinements, on-going work with the US Army Corps of Engineers, and dialogue with the Port Authority, County staff, 3CDC and various stakeholders. The changes are as follows:

1) Change in grade to section of park north of Mehring Way - This part of the park was conceived in the 1999 plan as primarily event space, though it was also to contain a playground, rows of trees and water features. It was to be at the grade of Mehring Way, which meant it was approximately 15 to 17 feet below the grade of Ted Berry Way and the rest of The Banks development, and it was within the flood plain. After careful consideration and much discussion with 3CDC, the Port and the design team, it was determined that the park would be much better served if this area were at the same level as the rest of The Banks. This moved the playground, carousel, and water features out of the flood plain, and brought an entire section of the park up to the same elevation as The Banks. This brings a part of the park closer to downtown and closer to everyday park users.

2) Changes to Festival/Event Space - Festivals and events were planned to take place on the great lawn south of Mehring Way and on Mehring Way itself when the street would be closed for such major activities. Events were also to take place in the section of the park north of Mehring Way as described above. At the same time as discussions were taking place about the benefits of raising this section of park to the elevation of Ted Berry Way and The Banks, there were also further discussions about the extent and nature of event space requirements in the park. Considering the existing event space in riverfront parks and at recreation sites, and also considering the many events that occur within downtown streets, a decision was made to reduce the size of the primary event space. In the revised plan, event lawns are proposed on both Block 11a and 11b, but both spaces are reconfigured to incorporate more park activities when no event is taking place. The great lawn and Mehring Way are still intended to accommodate major events.

3) Change in location of restaurant - The original plan showed a restaurant south of Mehring Way at the foot of Race Street. It should be noted that even at the time of the park plan approval in 1999, there were concerns about this location due to flooding and also due to structures south of Mehring interfering with the flow of open space along the river. As described below, the current plan moves the restaurant to Block 11 which is totally out of the flood plain and which brings the restaurants closer to The Banks and downtown.

4) Addition of pavilions in the park – Park-owned commercial structures are now proposed in the upper section of the park (Blocks 11a and 11b) to provide places for visitors to eat and drink. This is seen as an important service that will bring more people and year-round activity to the park, as well as generate revenue to offset operating costs.

5) Change in location of several features: The site of the playground, carousel and water features have changed slightly from the 1999 plan. The major fountain has been moved away from the river to a higher location to avoid frequent flooding. One of the playgrounds and the carousel location have also been moved out of the flood plain, while one of the play areas remains within the flood plain, though relocated south of Mehring Way.

6) Change in location of Maintenance compound and parking - The 1999 park plan proposed a park maintenance facility and parking facilities at the west end of

the park. Since it is anticipated that this phase will not be implemented for many years, the maintenance facility and parking are now proposed to be incorporated in Phase 1 and located below the lawn feature on Block 11b and accessed from Mehring Way.

7) Decks - No decks over Fort Washington Way were shown in the 1999 park plan. The idea of decking several sections of Fort Washington Way were conceived in the Hamilton County/Cincinnati Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan and the Park Board worked with stakeholders to come up with conceptual designs for the surface of the decks, with the understanding that the infrastructure of the decks themselves would be a part of the budget for The Banks and the riverfront street grid, not the park. In discussions over the last few years with 3CDC and stakeholders, the deck idea was modified to consider only a single deck between Vine and Walnut, immediately north of the Freedom Center. The locations of the other proposed decks would instead become development sites. As development sites, buildings would ultimately be built as air-right structures, extending the downtown grid of streets, and sidewalks.

FINDINGS

The above-described changes to the park master plan have been carefully thought out and are the result of several years of design study and stakeholder discussion. They will enhance the park experience as well as increase the park's sustainability. They are also consistent with the original intent of the park program and the intent of the original park design.

RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the City Planning Commission take the following actions:

1. Approve the revisions to the Central Riverfront Park Plan as approved by the Park Board on March 16, 2006;
2. Approve an update to the Hamilton County/Cincinnati Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan that would replace the 1999 Central Riverfront Park Plan with the 2006 revised Central Riverfront Park Plan;
3. Approve the updated Hamilton County/Cincinnati Central Riverfront Urban Design Master Plan with the 2006 revised Central Riverfront Park Plan as the Concept Plan and Development Program Statement for the Banks Planned Development District.

Respectfully Submitted,

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